

**Testimony Re: Biennium Budget FY 2018/2019 for DEEP and State Parks
Conservation and Development Public Hearing 2/17/17**

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Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony with regard to the proposed Biennium Budget and comment upon its negative ramifications for Connecticut's State Park System.

In the proposed budget, the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, is being asked to reduce its budget by \$4 million. The State Parks System, a small division within DEEP, with enormous responsibilities and incalculable benefits to the public, will be required to absorb half of that cut. Parks, a frequent target for budget reduction over the last 30 to 40 years cannot withstand a blow of this magnitude. As State Parks are already in a greatly weakened position with only 70 full time staff remaining to service 8-9 million patrons, any diminution in funds is disproportionately felt. Facing the loss of 35-40% of its 70 workers to retirement within the next three years, Parks certainly cannot afford to lose 45% of its seasonal staff as well.

Seasonals now must accomplish 85% of park work because permanent staff levels have so dramatically declined over the last decades. On average, a seasonal worker costs the State \$5,000 for up to 6 months work; that's pretty economical. By cutting \$1.8 million in Park personnel funding as is proposed and thus eliminating 45% of the work force that performs 85% of required duties, productivity in the Park System immediately falls to 60% fulfillment of baseline responsibilities. For the sake of a "savings" of \$1.8 million, we trade 40% of workload, seriously degrade parks' appearance and services, and in the process jeopardize a billion dollar plus annual stimulus to our economy and the \$6-7 million collected yearly at park gates. How is this wise?

Multiple government studies have for years pointed to the critical lack of Parks' resources. The Legislature's Program Review and Investigation Committee Report of three years ago concluded that additional funds were urgently required to rebuild staffing numbers to levels sufficient to steward the Park and Forest System's 250,000 acres, maintain its 450+ buildings and most importantly to service its growing visitor base of 8-9 million patrons. At present, approximately 70 field staff shepherd and maintain our parks. Staff numbers in the last forty-five years have already steeply declined from a level of 225 workers in 1971. Our present level of 70 in no way approaches the benchmark of 205 full time field staff recommended by the 2003 Clough Harbour Report, an exhaustive impartial study focused on infrastructure and personnel needs in the Park System.

On Parks' present trajectory, with no refills authorized in this budget or former positions restored, by 2020 less than 45 staff will remain to manage 109 parks and 32 forests. In 2020, the number of staff will be approximately 20% of the levels of 45 years ago and of the number recommended by Clough Harbour to steward the Park System. Without an immediate influx of new hires to begin to reverse this precipitous decline, the Park System will not be able to service patrons in all but a small minority of properties in the very near future.

For decades, Friends groups have struggled mightily to shore up a Park System starved for resources. Friends' substantial contributions of labor, goods, and funds have helped ameliorate the damage wrought by chronically insufficient state budget support. Friends' members however, cannot continue to contribute at our present levels, especially in terms of labor.

Friends' volunteers should in no way be regarded by anyone in State government as substitutes for staff. As personnel levels have dwindled, volunteers, the majority of whom are over 60, have increasingly found themselves assisting at parks in ways that are inappropriate either to their ages or skill sets. Senior citizens ought not to be expected to do work that should be handled by the young and fit. Any further reduction in the number of seasonal workers or failure to refill positions will either further pressure older volunteers to take on unsuitable responsibilities or more likely prompt them to abandon the Park System.

A large proportion of our 25 grassroots all volunteer organizations began to form in earnest in the early 1990's when the deteriorating condition of Parks became apparent. We hoped to turn around Parks' fortunes and encourage realistic support by our efforts. I cannot tell you how dispiriting it is for all Friends to know that in the years of our most concentrated efforts from 1990 to today, Parks have lost a staggering 115 positions falling from 185 to 70.

Advocates of Parks are not unrealistic about the difficulties of the present budget situation, but none can deny that State Parks have suffered in a disproportionate way in past decades in both flush times and lean. As a consequence, Parks now skirt dangerously close to becoming non-sustainable. We would ask that you a hard look at the State Parks allotment in the DEEP budget and assure that personnel funding does not diminish further.

We also ask that you support the establishment of a non-lapsing account dedicated solely to Parks. If collected park fees are kept within that fund for parks' upkeep and seasonal staffing and any new Parks' dedicated revenue receipts flow to the fund as well, the potential for damage from unpredictable and disproportionate budget cuts would be so much less.

Respectfully submitted,
Eileen Grant Friends of CT State Parks Board of Directors

State Parks' Field Personnel: A Snapshot

Full-Time Field Staff

At present State Parks field personnel number 70, shortly to fall to 69.

21 Park Supervisors (1 will retire by late winter)

46 Maintainers (1 has indicated a spring retirement; others may later announce)

3 Clerical

Staff is responsible for 8 to 9 million annual visitors, maintenance of approx. 450 buildings and on the ground stewardship of 250,000 acres. (109 parks, 32 forests)

Field staff numbers have fallen precipitously in the last 45 years.

In 1971: 225 Field Personnel

In 1988: 185 Field Personnel

In 1996: approx. 135 Field Personnel

In 2017: 69 Field Personnel (30% of 1971 levels)

By year 2020: With projected attrition, in just three years field staff totals will drop to less than 45 workers! No refills are authorized to replace those positions held by the approximately 35-40% who will shortly retire. In 2020, Parks may have only 20% of its field levels of 1971.

State Parks' Seasonal Personnel:

As a consequence of a dramatic diminution of permanent field staff, the State Parks System has been forced to rely very heavily on its seasonal work force. Seasonals in Parks typically number about 550 over a full year. (\$3.1-\$3.4 million in Parks)
Agency-wide, the seasonal budget is approx. \$4.5 million.

This fiscal year in response to the overall Agency cut, DEEP reduced the seasonal work force by 45% (a disproportionate \$1.8 million reduction to State Parks.) A commensurate cutback in services to the public, accomplishment of both short and long term maintenance and a contraction in recreational opportunities (camp site closures being some of the most notable) resulted from this harsh reduction.

Inadequate funds remain this fiscal year to fully underwrite critical 4th quarter hiring. Seasonals must be recruited in spring each year in order to adequately prepare for the busy summer period.

How Personnel is Affected in the Governor's Proposed Budget:

The State Parks System will shoulder half of the \$4 million cut to DEEP required in the Budget. (Personnel, equipment, operations reductions)

The Governor's Biennium Budget continues the \$1.8 million cut (45% of the seasonal labor force) for the next two years and allows for no replacement of retiring full time workers. At maximum, park staff will only be able to accomplish 60% of its baseline duties and provide very limited services to the public. With each passing month, as personnel retire, that percentage will diminish. It is likely that a number of the remaining personnel will need to be re-deployed to the parks with the highest visitation and greatest revenue collection capacity.

How State Parks Will Be Affected Should DEEP's Budget Decrease By More Than the 5% Reduction Proposed in the Governor's Budget:

In autumn 2016, OPM requested that DEEP prepare a plan to address a potential \$6million cut to the agency. In its prospective plan submitted to OPM on 10/13/16, DEEP estimated it might need to take a further \$2.6 million, on top of its already \$1.8 million reduction, to the overall \$4.5 million seasonal allotment to meet a \$ 6 million cut. This would essentially eliminate the seasonal budget entirely.

Quoting from DEEP's document: With an elimination of seasonal funds, "keep most day use areas in Parks open with little or no services, no campgrounds, no fee collection, no lifeguards. Eliminate No Child Left Inside and Environmental Education programs. Virtually eliminates park-generated income of over \$6 million. Requires refunds of camping reservations for the upcoming season."